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INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE  
RUEHGG/UN SECURITY COUNCIL COLLECTIVE  
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 1808  
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 5282  
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 8882  
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 6454  
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI  
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 4295  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2276  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC  
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS  
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000116

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP AND IO; PACOM FOR FPA

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SUBJECT: BURMA: SOME POLITICAL PRISONERS INCLUDED IN RELEASE

RANGOON 00000116 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: Pol Officer Sean O'Neill for Reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

Summary

1. (C) On February 20, Burma state media announced the government would free 6,313 prisoners on humanitarian grounds which would allow them to take part in the 2010 elections. At least 19 political prisoners, including four NLD members and seven monks, have been freed. The regime also reportedly somewhat reduced the sentences of at least six other political prisoners in the past week. See paragraph seven for possible press guidance. End Summary.

Four NLD members among those released

2. (C) NLD Spokesman Nyan Win confirmed that at least 19 political prisoners were among a total of 6,313 prisoners the Burma regime announced are being released. Those freed so far include seven monks and four NLD members. One of the NLD members is an MP-elect from the 1990 election who has been in jail for nearly two decades. (See paragraph 5 for a list). We are seeking to confirm exile media reports of additional political prisoner releases.

Prison sentence reductions

3. (SBU) The regime also reportedly reduced the sentences of at least 13 political prisoners in the past week. Among them, blogger Nay Phone Latt, sentenced to 20 years and six months in November 2008, had his sentenced reduced by eight and a half years, according to his mother. A Rangoon court reduced the prison sentence of imprisoned comedian and activist Zarganar from 59 years to 34 years, according to his sister. Zarganar's co-defendants, Zaw Thet Htway and Thant Zin Aung, had their sentences reduced by eight years each to 11 and 10 years respectively. The court reduced the sentence of a third co-defendant, Tin Maung Aye, from 29 to 14 years. Labor activist Su Su Nwe's lawyer told the Democratic Voice of Burma that a Rangoon court reduced his client's sentence from 12 and a half years to eight and a half years. Su Su Nwe has been in custody since her arrest

in November 2007. Courts also reduced from 12 and a half years to eight years the sentences of NLD members Ye Myint Oo and Thein Swe and human rights activists Zin Lin Aung and Myo Thant.

Reason for releases: humanitarian grounds  
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¶4. (U) Burma state media announced via radio and MRTV that the government would free the 6,313 prisoners for "humanitarian" grounds, and "as a gesture of showing sympathy towards their families," and "to participate in the fair election to be held in the year 2010 together with the people after realizing the government's compassion and goodwill." The government denies the existence of "political prisoners" and claims all those released committed crimes.

Partial list of those released  
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¶5. (SBU) Our contacts report the following political prisoners were released as part of the amnesty announced on February 20:

-Dr. Zaw Myint Maung, NLD MP-elect from Amarapura township in Mandalay Division, arrested in 1990 on charges of planning to form a parallel government; was serving a 25 year sentence;

-Phe Sein, NLD member from Kachin State, arrested for his alleged participation in the September 2007 protests; was serving a two year sentence;

-Thet Wai, NLD member from Sanchaung Township, Rangoon Division, arrested in 2008 in connection with possessing a

RANGOON 00000116 002.2 OF 002

memory stick containing complaints to the International Labor Organization about the use of child soldiers; was serving a two year sentence;

--Naw Naw, an NLD member from Kachin State and videocamera operator who chronicled Aung San Suu Kyi's travel in Myitkyina (Kachin State); date of arrest and sentence unknown.

-Tun Tun, student activist and member of the All Burma Federation of Student Unions, arrest date, charge, and sentence unknown;

-Khaing Ba Myint, Arakan Liberation Party member, arrest date, charge, and sentence unknown; and

-four unnamed monks from Rangoon's Bakara monastery, two unnamed monks from Kaing Kone monastery, and one unnamed monk from Sandar Thuria monastery, all reportedly arrested in 2003 when they refused to accept rice alms from then PM Khin Nyunt.

Comment  
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¶6. (C) The last such release of prisoners took place in September 2008. At that time, fewer than a dozen political prisoners (of 9,002 total) were released; but they included NLD Central Executive Committee members Win Tin and Khin Maung Swe. According to NLD's Nyan Win, only 1,000 of the 6,313 to be released this time have been processed, and it is possible additional political prisoners could be freed. Thus far, though, none of those released are high-profile. Win Tin told us today that the NLD is happy when any prisoners are released by the regime, "but it leaves a bad taste in the mouth" to realize what a very small percentage of them are political prisoners. Burmese PM Thein Sein may utilize the release in discussions at the ASEAN Summit later this week in Thailand. However, Embassy Rangoon does not perceive this release to be the "significant progress" that UN Human Rights Rapporteur for Burma Ojea Quintana called for last week, and that the international community, hopes for. End Comment.

Suggested press guidance

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17. (U) Suggested press guidance: Embassy Rangoon has confirmed that at least 19 political prisoners, including four members of the National League for Democracy (NLD) are among the 6,313 prisoners to be released by the Burmese Government. We welcome the release of the political prisoners, and urge the government to set free all remaining political prisoners, including high-ranking members of the country's democracy movement so that an inclusive dialogue can begin on Burma's political future.

Secretary Clinton just returned from Asia, a region that is key to U.S. interests. We want Burma to take its place as an economically prosperous, responsible member of that region and of the international community. The Burmese people deserve no less. The first step towards that end is dialogue. The NLD has pledged publicly to engage in a dialogue without preconditions. We call on the Burmese government to do the same.

DINGER